

How to Manage an Asthma Flare or Attack

It is important to know your asthma symptoms and what causes your asthma to worsen (triggers). Avoiding your triggers is the best way to avoid an asthma attack. Some triggers, like catching a cold, cannot be avoided. Other triggers, like being near tobacco smoke, can be avoided. If an asthma controller medicine is prescribed by your doctor, take it daily to prevent asthma attacks. These medicines keep swelling under control inside your airways.

The most common asthma symptoms include:

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Chest tightness

If you have these symptoms, you should take albuterol (or your prescribed medicine). Most inhaled bronchodilator medicines work within 5-10 minutes. If symptoms continue after 15-20 minutes, you should repeat your medicine.

If you have the symptoms listed below after taking your medicine, you should contact your doctor or health care provider:

- If asthma symptoms remain or get worse.
- If peak flow number (if checked) does not improve or gets worse.
- If you have trouble walking or talking because of shortness of breath or wheezing.

Go to the Emergency Room or call 911 if your breathing is difficult including:

- Pulling in of the chest and/or neck muscles.
- Hunching over to breathe.

- Struggling to get air in or out.
- You stop playing or working and cannot start again.
- Your medicine is not helping your symptoms.
- Your lips or finger nails are looking blue in color.
- You have trouble walking or talking.

Never drive yourself to the emergency room if you are having asthma symptoms. Call a family member, friend, or neighbor to help or call 911. Try to remain calm if you or your loved one has asthma symptoms that are getting worse. Anxiety can make asthma symptoms worse.

Please talk to your doctor or nurse to help prevent asthma attacks. Ask for a written asthma action plan which will help you manage asthma flares or attacks. These plans include:

- Knowing your warning signs, triggers, and peak flow zones so you can begin treatment early.
- Taking the correct amount of medicine at the times your doctor has recommended.
- If the asthma control plan includes an increased dosage or a second medicine to be used during flares or attacks (yellow zone), taking it as prescribed.
- Always calling your doctor if you need to take more medicine than what was ordered.
- Removing yourself or your loved one from the trigger if you know what it is.
- Trying to stay calm and relaxed.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 5/2018 by the University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics Authority, All Rights Reserved. Department of Nursing. HF#5125